

Left Behind

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Summary: When Kirk's first landing party assignment turns anything but routine, he find himself injured and alone .. and in the middle of a planet's civil war. With Enterprise out of reach, it's up to Spock to keep Kirk alive. As help arrives, Kirk is left needing to solve a mystery and to find the last of his men now left behind.

1. Chapter 1

Kirk slammed into the stone wall. His left shoulder absorbed most of the impact, but the jarring sent a wave of agony through his torn side. His breath hissed out between his gritted teeth. _Shit!_ He tried to catch his breath, pressing a hand to his bloody side as his legs buckled and he slowly collapsed onto his knees. The hollow sound of photons filled the air and he could feel the ground tremble as the relentless barrage continued. The artillery pattern was brilliantly laid out to disorient and scatter the enemy. It had worked only too well on them.

"We gotta move, Captain," Lt. Weston said. His round face was flushed and covered with sweat, his hair plastered to his head. Eyes wide with concern, he was breathing rapidly as he crouched next to Kirk behind the safety of the wall. "We're in the cross-fire, sir."

Kirk nodded, trying to catch his own breath. The thin atmosphere of the planet made it impossible. "I'm aware of that, Lieutenant."

The hole in his side was evidence enough that they'd stepped into the wrong field while investigating the planet. Before Kirk knew it, they were standing in the middle of a battlefield as two sides appeared out of nowhere and converged in a fury of fire. Their remote scanners had missed the obvious gathering of troops. The landing party, dressed in native garb for concealment, had scattered under the artillery, but not before a single shot struck Kirk, tearing through his left side. He hadn't even noticed he was shot until he was well away from the landing party and his legs had buckled under the

strain.

Weston flipped open his communicator. "Weston to _Enterprise_."

Static filled the air.

He frantically adjusted the settings. "Weston to _Enterprise_. Emergency beam out! _Enterprise!_"

"The photons are interfering," Kirk said tightly. The pain in his side had not lessened, nor had the blood slowed. If anything, it had gotten worse. He felt it seeping between his fingers and running down his back, soaking into the thin fabric of the native attire. The photon had gone all the way through him, burning into his flesh. He didn't know what kind of damage it had done and he didn't have time to worry about it. They had to get out of here fast. Quickly assessing the landscape, he jerked his head in a direction behind him. "We have to get behind the lines and rendezvous with the rest of the landing party."

Two months into his captaincy and this was the first exploratory assignment Pike had granted him. The planet was neutral and not a member of the Federation, but Starfleet Intelligence had suspected that someone was interfering in the planet's sociological development.

"__This is a sovereign planet. Observe, Jim," Pike said sternly. "Investigate. __**Don't **__get involved."__

He couldn't risk making contact with the natives and violating the Prime Directive, but he sure as hell wasn't going to be a sitting target. His orders didn't say anything about that.

"How, sir?" Weston asked. "We don't even know where the rest of the landing party is."

Spock, Bini and Cooper had run to the west where there was no fighting, while Kirk and Weston had ended up headed south in an effort to avoid the artillery. But the battle turned rapidly and, instead of running behind the fighting as Kirk had intended, they found themselves trapped in the middle of the warring parties. "Head west. If we get split up, keep moving west." He shivered suddenly as a spasm of white-hot pain tore through his side. He looked Weston directly in the eyes. "Don't let the natives make contact with you, even if you have to stay put."

"Yes, sir."

With an effort, he pushed himself to his feet and immediately bent at the waist as the muscles around his ribs and abdomen stretched with the movement. It fired up his nerves and he could only manage a hunched pose. Sweat rolled down his face and stung his eyes. He pressed his hand more firmly into his bloody side as if the pressure would somehow relieve the agony or staunch the flow of blood. It did neither. He swayed and Weston's hand latched onto his bicep with an iron grip. He didn't have time to think about the pain or debate the merits of his decision. A sudden blast from a photon struck the wall, sending a spray of stones into the air. In an instant, they were moving.

Each step over the rocky, grass-covered ground jarred a new wave of agony through him, but he forced his legs to keep moving, wheezing out breaths in rapid succession. The heat was oppressive, the air thin and the sounds of battle deafening as the artillery hit its marks. He felt the sear of a phaser blast skim his right shoulder, igniting his nerves on fire. He clenched his jaw, refusing the pain. The odor of burnt flesh barely registered as he kept his breakneck pace. Just ahead was the cover of trees and the promise of reprieve. He was almost there, he told himself, pushing his body and ignoring the pain.

He was almost to the trees when something slammed into him. He went down hard.

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Pike was going to kill him.

It was Kirk's first coherent thought as he returned to consciousness. The second was that he was on his back in the middle of a battle, wounded and alone. Struggling to open his eyes and focus, he squirmed in a futile effort to ease the pain in his side and he tried to get an arm beneath him for leverage. If he was going to die, he wasn't going to do it lying down.

"Do not move."

The command penetrated his fuzzy thoughts as a hand pressed to his chest, holding him down. Fuck! He struck at the hand that held him in place, only to have his captured and held in a vice-like grip.

"Captain. You must lie still."

He was bringing his leg up to deliver a kick when the word registered in his brain: Captain. A shudder tore through him and he suppressed a moan. He stopped struggling, blinking to clear his vision. "Spock?"

"Yes, Captain. You must lie still. You have been injured."

His head dropped back onto the ground with a thud and he took a few moments to breathe. His side throbbed, setting every nerve in his middle on fire. Gritting his teeth, he stifled a groan and concentrated on his surroundings. His vision slowly came into focus and he saw the narrow features of the Vulcan hovering over him. "Where are we?"

"Out of the line of fire."

His head pounded and he felt himself shaking uncontrollably. The burning pain in his side spread out from beneath his ribs into his belly, stretching up to his solar plexus. Each breath caught in his chest and he closed his eyes for a moment, trying to push down the pain. When he opened his eyes again, his thoughts were clearer. They were in the forest, under a canopy of leaves. The ground was damp and slightly cool beneath him and the earthy aromas seemed to help clear his mind. He rolled his head to the left. The terrain spun dizzily around him.

"Where's Weston?"

"I do not know. You were alone when I found you." Spock's eyebrows were drawn together as he stared at Kirk. Despite the dark smudges staining the pale features, the Vulcan looked annoyingly well kept. And still holding Kirk's hand.

"You can let go of my hand now," he said weakly.

Spock released his grip and straightened his spine. His expression, as always, was disciplined and unrevealing. "I was concerned you would aggravate your injury."

"Noted." He dragged his hand to his side, feeling a thick pad of fabric covering his middle and frowned.

"I dressed the wound as supplies allowed," Spock said, staring at him with an unreadable expression. "You have lost a significant amount of blood."

Bini had the medical kit, which meant Bini was lost, as well. What he wouldn't give for a hypo right now. He felt exhaustion weigh on him. "Where's the rest of the landing party?"

"Unknown. We were separated under a concentrated artillery pattern."

Jesus, that was just fucking great. They were supposed to observe and report and now three of his landing party members were somewhere in the middle of a sovereign planet's battle, and he was lying there with a damn hole in his side. Pike was definitely going to kill him. "We have to find them."

Both of Spock's eyebrows climbed beneath the perfectly trimmed bangs.

"We can do nothing at the moment, Captain. Communications are down. We will have to wait another one point six hours for Enterprise to beam us out."

Protocol. He'd balked at Spock's insistence on a pre-arranged beam out if the landing party did not make contact in four hours, wanting the freedom to follow whatever trail he deemed necessary, to observe the native population. But Spock remained immovable in his position and Kirk had finally relented, irritated that his first officer didn't trust his judgment. Sometimes he still felt like that third year cadet who stood before the Academy Board, defending his actions.

He lifted his head and tried to rise to his elbows to get a better view of their surroundings, but agony tore through his entire left side. A strangled cry escaped him and he squeezed his eyes shut, pressing back onto the ground even as Spock placed a hand on his shoulder to hold him place. "Fuck."

"Please lay still, Captain. We must remain unseen to the natives."

Mission first. The damn regs again.

As he tried to even out his respirations and get control of the pain, he realized something had changed. In the distance he still heard the fire of photons, but the frequency had lessened. The battle was ending or turning, one side driving into enemy territory. "They're moving," he gasped.

"Yes."

His heart pounded rapidly, thundering in his chest and sending a constant wave of pain through him. He turned his head in the direction of the battle. From where he lay, he saw little but a cloud of smoke hanging thinly over the field. "How long?"

"Until we can beam up to the ship?"

"No." He bit down as another wave of pain dug into his abdomen. "Since when since the battle began?" He pressed his hand to the wound, trying to ease the gnawing.

Spock looked down at him. "Two point three hours."

Not long as far as battles were concerned, but it was moving away from them, which was a good thing. If the planet inhabitants followed normal battle practices, medics wouldn't come onto the field until the artillery cleared. He closed his eyes as dizziness disoriented his vision. "How many fighters?"

"I estimate over a thousand."

"Ground troops," he said breathlessly and opened his eyes. "Long-range artillery."

"Yes." For the first time, Spock looked uncertain. "Unless either side changes defensive postures, we will be safe here."

He shivered and stifled another moan. "No such thing as safe in a battle, Spock." His words were slurred. "Doesn't make sense." At Spock's inquisitive expression, he added, "Battles are about territory. Moved in a parallel line."

"You believe they are maneuvering into a more favorable position."

"Leapfrogging." That would put his men at greater risk. If his assessment was correct, another offensive would be launched from a different location, driving the opposing side into an inescapable position. "That's what I'd do," he mumbled, his eyes drifting shut.

A sudden, sharp pain in his side caused him to cry out. Spock's hand pressed into Jim's bloody side where Jim's hand had slipped from its hold. The pressure sent another onslaught of fiery pain through his side and hip.

"Fuck, Spock" he ground out, arching slightly as if to dislodge the Vulcan's hand as his fingers dug into the soft soil. The heel of Spock's hand pressed determinedly into the softness of his side. He gasped through the pain, bending his right leg for leverage and digging his heel into the ground.

"We must keep adequate pressure to staunch the blood loss."

Christ! As his body adjusted to the new pressure, the pain lessened slightly and he found himself taking short breaths to avoid disturbing the temporary lull in the agony. He shivered, blinking several times to clear his vision. "How bad?"

"You have lost considerable blood," Spock said evenly.

"You said that already," he breathed out. His head pounded.

Without missing a beat, Spock continued. "I am unable to determine organ damage without a tricorder. However, a spleen rupture is most likely given the location and severity of the photon blast and the amount of blood lost."

Cold settled in on him as he stared at Spock. "Have you been taking tips on bedside manners from Bones?"

"I have not." Confusion slipped onto the otherwise unreadable features.

"Probably just as well," he said weakly with a small smile. His gaze wandered again to the battlefield. "Hell of a debut for my first set down."

"You could not have foreseen these events," Spock said thoughtfully. "The probes did not register a congregation of the planet's natives prior to your approving the landing site."

"Didn't register photons, either." He shivered. "We've gotta raise the Enterprise and find the rest of the the landing party."

"At the moment, we can do neither."

He tried to shift, but Spock's hand on his side prevented him, so he let his body still and took shallow breaths, trying not to increase his pain.

"We can only wait, Captain." He looked down with hooded eyes. "You should rest."

At the Academy, he had taken many classes on tactical maneuvers, battle focus training and physics, as well as diplomacy and negotiations. But it was the behavior science and leadership courses he excelled at. 'A natural leader' one of his instructors had said on his evaluation. 'But reckless and impetuous in his decision making.'

Pike had counselled him that a commanding officer's position was not on the line of battle, but behind it, driving the strategy.

"You continually put yourself in the line of fire, Cadet," Pike had said. "A dead captain isn't of any use to anyone."

But he didn't know how to be anything else. His impetuous decision-making had saved Earth and Pike. Had it now gotten them stranded? Had it killed his men?

He drifted in and out, the pain constant and draining. He tried to keep still. Occasionally, he felt Spock's hand on his chest â€" a silent command â€" as he moved restlessly against the pain. The heat seemed to rescind as a chill seeped into him. This, too, seemed distant and removed as he drew one breath and then another in a foggy limbo that eluded all boundaries. Each time he surfaced from the greyness, no matter how briefly, he'd instinctively listen, hoping for the familiar beep of the biobed's monitor telling him he was on _Enterprise_. But all he heard was the uneven sounds of his breathing and faint resonance of battle. Vaguely, he felt Spock's hand still pressed firmly into his bloody side and knew he was not alone.

"Spock to _Enterprise_."

A blast of static filled the air as he struggled to rouse from the shadows.

"Spock to _Enterprise_."

"Enterprise, Uhura here. Are you all right? We lost communication with you."

"Have the transporter lock onto our coordinates, Lieutenant. We need an immediate beam out."

Silence. Spock looked down at Jim with worry in his eyes.

"Scott here, sir." The thick Scottish accent came through surprisingly clear. "We canna get a lock on you. There's too much interference. We had ta jury-rig communication just ta get this connection and I don't know how long it'll last. Is the captain with you?"

"I'm here, Scotty," Jim said weakly. "What's causingâ€|interference?"

"We're not sure, but it's transient. Started right after you beamed down."

"Photons," Kirk said faintly. His head began to pound again.

"More than likely." Spock agreed. "Mr. Scott, are you able to accurately monitor the transporter interference?"

"I can tell if you're clear for transporter function, if that's what you mean. What's your situation?"

Spock mouth tightened. "The Captain is injured and in need of immediate medical attention. We've lost contact with the rest of the landing party."

"Can ya move locations? We might be able to find a clear area for transportation."

Spock's hand was still pressed firmly into Kirk's side. "Negative. We must wait for transportation."

"We'll send down a shuttle and â€"

"No," Kirk said with as much energy as he could muster. Talking tightened the muscles in his side, spreading a burning ache into him. "Can't risk it."

"We can put it out of sight, sir. Send in a recon."

He shook his head, feeling another wave of dizziness distort his vision.

"There is too much risk involved, Mr. Scott," Spock said. "We cannot allow the indigenous species to see us. We will have to remain where we are until the transporters are working."

Voices speaking over one another filtered through the communicator. They were muffled, but the anger and anxiety were evident in the tones. Kirk frowned as he tried to make out the voices. It sounded chaotic, the crew moving from business as usual to crisis. He was about to call for Scotty, when a voice came through.

"Spock, McCoy here. What's Jim's condition?"

"The Captain was shot with a level 4 photon. Entrance wound two centimeters below his left ribs. Another grazed his right shoulder, but appears superficial. He has lost considerable blood, but is conscious and coherent."

Spock, always so efficient. He sounded like he was reading a report instead of relaying his captain's injuries.

McCoy swore. "Is it through and through?"

"Yes. I am applying pressure in an attempt to slow the bleeding, however it is having little effect. I suspect internal bleeding."

"What are his vitals?"

"Lt Bini has the medical kit and I do not know her location."

"You can take a pulse, can't you?" McCoy's words were sharp.

"Stop hollering â€| at Spock, Bones," Kirk said faintly. Another shiver swept through him.

"Jim." McCoy's tone softened. "How are you feeling? Are you dizzy? Short of breath?"

"Yes."

"To which one?" he asked shortly.

"All them." Kirk took another shallow breath. "But I'm okay." His vision began to dim. "Spock's 'xaggerating."

"Like hell he is. You've got a damn hole in your side."

"It's a little hole." He could hear that his words were slurring.

"Spock, get me his pulse and respirations."

Spock rested his long fingers along the side of Kirk's neck for a few seconds, and then moved to lay his hand on Kirk's chest. All the while, Kirk watched him. He seemed stoic, unresponsive, and yet oddly attentive and somehow concerned. He doesn't like this. Too emotional. Too intimate. Was he like this with Pike? All those years of service together, they must have developed some kind of a relationship. Understood each other's boundaries, patterns? No. Pike wouldn't have gotten himself shot and stranded.

"Pulse is rapid and difficult to ascertain. Respirations are 30."

"Are they shallow?"

"Yes."

Pause.

"He's going into shock. You have to keep him warm. Do you have any water to give him?"

"None, doctor."

A soft curse. "Keep him still. Any movement can start him bleeding more badly."

"We're not going anywhere, Bones."

"Jim"

"'sokay." His words were getting more slurred, which made it difficult to sell his 'I'm fine, really' act, but he heard the worry in Bones' voice and didn't want his friend to know how bad it was. "I'm not done yet."

"You better not be," McCoy said. His words were harsh, but his tone was gentle. "You're the first captain under my care. Think of my reputation if you die."

Kirk smiled. His vision blurred. "You'll survive." His words were no more than a whisper.

"So will you, you idiot." McCoy's words were thick with emotion.

"Miss your entertainment," he said faintly, then immediately regretted it.

"Looks like you did just fine without me," McCoy said heavily.

It was the conversation they had just had this morning

"Bones, you need to get some away mission time logged in," Kirk said. "You can't limit yourself to the ship."

They were walking on Deck 4, McCoy having raced to get Kirk's attention between appointments. McCoy had just gotten word this morning that Kirk wanted him in the landing party. He shot Kirk a

scowl as they kept up their pace._

_"__This is the first mission where __**you're **__allowed off ship, Jim. Don't confuse your enthusiasm with mine. Some of us like the order and routine of the ship."_

_"__You hate space," Kirk said incredulously. They stopped at the turbo lift. "It'll be good for you, Bones. Get off the ship, stretch your legs. Aren't you the one that always says a doctor needs to be where the action is?"_

_"__Like hell. And what action? You're going down to observe for a few hours. You won't be in contact with any inhabitants. You don't need a CMO there waiting to treat eye-strain due to boredom."_

_The lift opened and they stepped into the lift as the doors hissed shut behind them. _

_"__That's clever, Bones," Kirk said with a grin._

_"__Damn it, Jim, I've got all of security to evaluate and Starfleet insists they be in space during evaluation. This tour is only two weeks and we'll be back on Earth. I don't have time to entertain you on a landing party."_

Kirk turned to him. He knew his friend hated away missions and the prospect of exploring unknown planets. As a physician, Bones always saw the worse-case scenario, the hidden dangers of prolonged space-travel or exposure to unknown bacteria or viral infections. But the truth was, Kirk liked having Bones with him and this was his first away mission. He wanted to share it with his friend. "Maybe I like having you around."

_"__You like an audience," McCoy said sourly. "Take Spock with you. He's more tolerant of your aggrandizing."_

That wasn't true. Since becoming first officer, Spock seemed to challenge Kirk at every turn. And worse than that, Kirk felt as if Spock were evaluating him instead of the other way around.

The lift stopped and Kirk turned to McCoy. "Okay. But find me someone from medical with a good sense of humor, because I'm going to miss that about you."

Kirk wanted to tell McCoy that he wished it were him here instead of Spock, that he should have insisted McCoy come down, but he didn't have the strength, and even if he did, he couldn't say that in front of Spock. Vulcan or not, Kirk was trying to establish some type of working relationship with his first officer that didn't consist of a debate.

"Scotty â€¦ get â€¦ transporters working." Kirk shivered. His eyes began to close as exhaustion dragged on him. "Locate â€¦ members of the landing party. I â€¦ I don't like them scattered â€¦ like this."

"Aye, sir."

Spock said, "Keep this communication open. We will make contact every thirty minutes."

"I want vitals every thirty minutes," McCoy demanded. "Let me know if anything changes."

"Yes, Doctor."

"And ****don't**** move him."

"I will do my best."

"Jim, don't do anything stupid down there."

Kirk smiled weakly at the idea. He'd already gotten himself shot and stranded. Death or capture was the only other option, and he'd be damned if he was going to add violating the Prime Directive to the list of disasters that made up this mission. He'd end his captaincy in the line of duty on a planet that didn't even have a real name. It wouldn't even be a footnote in the very short file of his career. He closed his eyes. The pain in his side was throbbing now with each beat of his heart and talking tired him.

"Jim?" McCoy said.

I hear you. Stop worrying.

"We will contact you in thirty minutes. Spock out."

For a long time, the two of them sat in silence, listening to the fading artillery. They had stepped into the middle of a civil war on a sovereign planet that had shown no prior signs of disputes and that worried Kirk. His orders were to observe, but Starfleet obviously thought that there was interference from somewhere. And whoever they were, they had to have provided the native species with the photons.

"Soldiers for hire."

"Captain?" Spock's voice was thick with worry.

He swallowed past the dryness in his throat. My God he was thirsty. "Someone's funding 's war."

"The thought had occurred to me, as well. Photons are beyond the scope of the inhabitants industry."

Spock's fingers kept their steady pressure on his side, anchoring him to the soft ground. "Who?"

"I do not have sufficient data to answer that question. I could only speculate."

Kirk shivered as a wave of coolness swept over him. Late afternoon and the sun was finally making its way across the sky. It was hours yet to sundown, when the temperatures would drop and the inhabitants would begin to clear the battlefield.

"This isn't going to end well." And at Spock's inquiring gaze added, "Civil war â€| interference â€| us stuck in the middle â€| no intel, no evidence â€| no transportation." His breathing had increased to shallow, rapid inhalations, and he took a moment to catch his breath.

"It's not looking good."

Spock raised a single eyebrow. "I thought you did not believe in no-win scenarios."

"I didn't say we weren't going to win. I said it wasn't going to end well."

2. Chapter 2

Spock lightly pressed his fingers to Kirk's carotid artery and counted the faint throbbing of his pulse. It was an unnecessary action. The long column of Kirk's neck was clearly exposed and he could easily see the pulse moving beneath the pale flesh, but touching the cooler than Vulcan flesh gave him an illogical comfort. Kirk had not moved in over fourteen minutes, laying unnaturally still. In the past six months Spock had served as First Officer to Kirk, he had observed the young captain rarely remained motionless for long. Even standing at attention in front of Admiral Pike, Kirk could only hold the pose for two minutes before shifting his muscles. Discipline was not a strong suite of Kirk's, but the Admiral seemed to indulge him more than Spock thought appropriate.

He removed his hand from Kirk's neck and reached for his communicator, keeping his other hand firmly pressed to Kirk's bleeding side. "Spock to _Enterprise_."

Silence.

He waited for thirty seconds and tried again, only to be met with silence once more. The last several check-ins had gone without incident. Enterprise had retrieved Bini and Cooper from the landing party and they were safely onboard. The transportation field was minimizing with the decrease of the barrage of photons and Spock could only surmise that they were getting closer to beaming up, which was well advised because Kirk's vitals had continued to worsen.

Resting back on his heels, he took a moment to close his eyes and center himself. With Kirk unconscious, the flood of emotions radiating from him had gratefully stopped. Vulcans were touch telepaths, but under extreme duress, human emotions could be felt by Vulcans and other equally sensitive beings. Through his years on Earth, Spock had learned to shield human emotions with little effort, but being this close to Kirk â€" wounded and in pain â€" had put a great deal of stress on his ability to maintain a safe distance.

Kirk moved slightly beneath him and he was forced to reposition his hand to keep pressure on the open wound. Blood had dried sticky and thick, sealing his fingers together. He could see the slow spreading pool of dark liquid from beneath Kirk. The soft ground was not eager to absorb it and some of it reached Spock's knees, staining the rudimentary fabric.

His communicator beeped in his hand and he quickly raised it to his lips. "Spock here."

"You're late," McCoy ground out.

"The signal is unreliable."

"How's Jim?"

"His respirations are 34 and shallow, heart rate is 123 and irregular. He is unconscious."

"Is he still bleeding?"

"Yes."

Pause.

"We can't wait any longer, Spock," McCoy said heavily.

It was a conversation they had had earlier, whether to move Kirk or wait for the transporter to capture their signal. Beaming was less risky than moving Kirk, who could tear open whatever slowly bleeding lacerations his organs had sustained and bleed to death in a matter of minutes. Not to mention any other of a number of injuries that could be incurred due to jostling an injured patient. Spock would have to carry Kirk across an alien and rugged terrain, during which time he would be unable to continue the pressure needed to staunch the flow of blood.

"The odds against the Captain survivingâ€" "

"He's in hypovolemic shock! His organs are going to start shutting down if they haven't already. You're risking brain damage and death keeping him there. You've got to get him back to the ship!"

"Doctorâ€" "

"Scott, here, sir. We've been monitoring the fields and there may be an opening about 2.3 kilometers to the west at ."

Spock surveyed the battlefield, now strangely quiet and cast in a gray shadow. The sun was quickly setting, throwing most of the field into a thick twilight. The woods where he and Kirk rested offered some protection now. They would be able to move further into the trees with little risk to being found, but the risk to Kirk was greater. The human was weak and struggling. Moving him was contraindicated.

"What is Weston's status?" he asked.

"No word from him. His signal is still dead. He must be in the area of the field that's blocked."

Spock looked down at Kirk, whose face was an unhealthy white-gray, lips bloodless and slightly parted with faint, rapid breaths. It unsettled Spock to see the normally animated features become lax as the life-force within him waned. McCoy was right; they were running out of time. He estimated Kirk had little more than an hour or two before blood loss and shock would be irreversible.

"For Christ's sake, Spock, make a decision," McCoy commanded. "Jim's dying."

For a moment he wondered what Kirk would do. The mercurial mind excelled at strategic thinking. Spock had witnessed that more than once. He had found it difficult to anticipate what his young captain would do, but of this he was certain: When faced with a choice to move into action or wait, Kirk always chose action. "I will move the Captain to the coordinates provided."

"It's about goddamn time."

Kirk's eyes fluttered opened and Spock could see the dull blue eyes struggle to focus.

"It should take no more than forty-five minutes to reach the destination. I will make contact upon arrival."

Scott said, "We'll monitor you. As soon as you and the captain are clear, we'll beam you up."

"Understood. Spock out."

"Arrival?" Kirk's words were no more than a whisper, discernable only to Vulcan hearing.

"We cannot wait for the transporter to clear. We must move out of the field." Spock removed his hand from Kirk's side, feeling the soft flesh tighten with pain. Already Kirk's features were twisting into an expression of agony. He slid his hand beneath Kirk.

"No," Kirk said weakly, his hand coming up to grab clumsily at Spock's shirt. "Too risky."

"It is a calculated risk." He lifted Kirk in one smooth motion. Kirk cried out, biting back the remaining scream and sank his teeth into his lips as Spock carefully adjusted his grip. The pain that radiated from Kirk pressed Spock's limits to shield. He took only a moment to mentally adjust himself before he began walking.

"We're not leaving," Kirk whispered.

Spock continued his pace, using all his skills to keep Kirk steady and avoid jarring that might cause damage.

"That's order." Kirk's breath came in wheezing gasps. His lips were bloodless and pulled into a tight line while his head hung at an odd angle over Spock's arm.

"I shall put myself on report upon returning to the ship."

A groan escaped Kirk as he closed his eyes. "Weston is still out there."

The ground was uneven and slightly pliable. Spock's boots sank into the soggy ground, weighted now with an additional burden. "My priority is the captain of the ship and the success of our mission. Lieutenant Weston is expendable."

"Fuck."

Kirk's knuckles skimmed Spock's jaw. The blow was poorly aimed and

lacked any amount of power. It did nothing to slow Spock's pace.

"I'm ordering you." The last word barely finished before a coughing fit wracked him. His fingers twisted into his bloody side in an effort, Spock surmised, to ease the pain.

The body in Spock's arm shuddered and stilled. Kirk's head dropped back, his mouth parting with shallow gasps. Warm blood soaked into Spock's shirt. He pressed Kirk closer and quickened his pace.

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Kirk feels the movement before the pain. His head is thrown back against an unyielding surface, bobbing slightly with the motion. Rolling his head, he opens his eyes to a gray wall. Spock's shirt. Shit. He's being carried. Now he remembers. His right arm hangs down. The weight of it pulls at the tendons in his shoulder, which is, it seems, the only pain he feels.

He lifts his gaze to see the pale features of his first officer. The black eyes are hooded and focused, the mouth relaxed into an indecipherable pose. How long they have been moving, he doesn't know.

"Put me down." He can barely hear his own words. But the Vulcan heard. The black eyes turn to study him briefly.

"That is not advisable."

He shivers. All the warmth has been leached out of him, his body wrung out and empty. It takes all his strength to move his arm. It feels as if it's encased in lead. By the time he manages to pull his arm up, he's exhausted and his hand falls on his bent belly, fingers weakly gripping his bloody shirt. He can hear himself wheezing and it makes him wince. It's so difficult to breathe. Blinking a few times, his vision comes into focus and he sees that they are still in the forest, still moving away from the battlefield and Weston. He raises a shaking hand to push at Spock's torso. He isn't certain exactly what his plan is, but he doesn't want to just allow himself to be carried like a damn Victorian heroine. Spock's chest is solid and immovable. His fingers brush the wall of muscles with the strength of an infant. His hand falls back, trembling.

"Yor on re'ort."

Fuck it. He's still captain, injured or not. But he hates his weakness even more than he hates Spock's superior strength. He's been up against this strength before. Vulcan bone is denser, the muscles solid. Vulcans only look lean and passive, but they are lethal when they want to be. In his current condition, he can do nothing to free himself.

"Understood, Captain."

Spock's acquiescence is even more infuriating. He closes his eyes and concentrates on breathing. It takes a moment for him to realize they have stopped. With an effort, he opens his eyes. They are in a very small clearing with long grass that stretched up past Spock's ankles.

The sun is behind the trees and the area is cast in an auburn glow that makes it look ancient and inhospitable. He looks at Spock.

"What?"

Spock carefully lowers him to the ground. Kirk's body is like that of a disjointed puppet. His head tilts as Spock slides his arm from beneath him. Warm fingers cradle the back of his skull and reposition his head with surprisingly gentleness. His legs lay where they fall after Spock's arms free him. Kirk looks up at Spock and sees the dark stain spilling down the Vulcan's shirt. He stares at it uncomprehendingly, as if he cannot understand the significance of it.

Spock pulls out his communicator. "Spock to Enterprise."

Static fills the air. So much for plan B. They should have stayed as he had ordered. Moving targets are difficult to track, even with Enterprise's sophisticated devices. He wheezes in another breath. He is so cold.

Spock keeps the communicator in his left hand, looking out into the terrain. It is silent around them, the trees and fauna absorbing the sounds of their breathing, cradling them in solitude. Spock looks determined. He has seen that look before, when Spock sat in the command chair as they raced to the Laurentian system and Kirk had pleaded with him to turn the ship around, reminding him he was captain and had a responsibility to rescue Pike and stop Nero. All Kirk's anger and demands had been met with the same infuriating imperious expression. Had it only been six months ago?

"s'okay," Kirk said as much for Spock as for himself.

Spock looks down at him and something shifts in the planes of the Vulcan's face, subtly softening the angles. The pale lips twitch. For a moment, Kirk thinks he might say something, but then his mouth compresses and the narrow eyebrows draw down. He stretches out his arm and rests his hand on Kirk's chest.

It's okay. Kirk's vision narrows, the edges crowded with gray. Nothing hurts, he wants to tell Spock. He tries to stay focused on Spock, to draw strength from him, but he's losing his vision. His heart pounds rapidly in an irregular beat and he knows he's run out of time. Suddenly, he doesn't want to be flat on his back. He doesn't want to die lying down in a soggy field.

"__I dare you to do better.__"

Fuck you, Pike. He'd been running from that ghost his entire life, thought maybe, this time, he'd outrun it. He tries to raise his head, but he can't. His body is weighted.

"Lie still."

He doesn't want to lie still. He doesn't want to be silent and unnoticed. He doesn't want to die on his first away mission as captain of the Enterprise, a mere footnote in Starfleet archives, something for the Academy to study. Like his father. He wants to go back to Enterprise. He wants to go home. His thoughts drift and skip like a stone across water. Home.

_"Admiral Pike, I relieve you," Kirk said, trying to maintain his posture at attention. He can feel the hundreds of eyes focused on him, waiting and watching. Don't look down. Stay at attention.

—

Pike's mouth curls. "I am relieved. Congratulations â€" Captain."

Captain.

"I know your face from history," Nero sneers. "Captain Kirk was a great man."

Fuck you.

Spock's face is a few centimeters from his. "You must lie still."

Spock's hands are on his shoulders. He can barely breathe, his lungs pulling in thin breaths. It's too much effort. It's like trying to breathe through paper. Spock repositions his hands and presses his long fingers into Kirk's torn side.

"Forgive me."

Had he cried out? The pain is dull and distant. He doesn't tell Spock that he can't feel anything below his waist, that which he can't see anymore. His world has gone dark and cold. It doesn't matter, he tells himself. There is nothing the Vulcan can do. Spock will wait silently, keeping his thoughts to himself â€" watching and waiting. If Bones were here, his friend would scowl down at him and tell him to keep breathing, press a large, gentle hand to his forehead and swear at him for being so reckless.

Everything is dark. He can't feel Spock's hands on him, but he knows the Vulcan has not left. Spock will be sitting with him long after he's drawn his last breath.

Take me home.

He doesn't feel the tingle of the transporter. He doesn't feel anything.

ef

The water beat down on McCoy, hot and steady as steam filled the tiny shower just outside of the surgical suites. His hands rested flat against the smooth wall as his head hung low, letting the water roll off the curve of his back, loosening the tight muscles. He was squandering more than three days ration of water, but he didn't care. He just wanted to wash away the past four and half hours.

God, he was tired.

A warning buzz sounded, echoing in the narrow stall, alerting him to the water constraints. It was the third such warning. Medical had priority in water consumptions, but it only went so far. He raised his head to the downpour, letting the drops beat on his face, numbing the skin. He imagined the water seeping into the epidermal layers, wearing through the thin wall of muscles and hitting the smooth

surface of bone where it would roll off, sterile and unencumbered.

The water stopped abruptly. He took a shuddering in breath. Lesson learned: Don't fuck with the quartermaster. He remained as he was, breathing in the steam and letting the rivulets trickle down his naked body. It took long minutes before he requested the air drier. The pressure of the hot air was a rude awakening to the gentleness of the shower and the soft mist of the steam. All at once he was surrounded by harsh blasts of air that were designed to quickly rid the body of moisture. The air came from everywhere and he was forced to plant his feet shoulder-length apart to keep steady. The air hit between his legs with a gale force. It was like being fucked by the rear engines of a Starfleet cruiser.

With his eyes shut, his mind recalled.

Jim's body lay unmoving on the narrow gurney as McCoy entered the surgical suite. Fresh whole blood and fluids were being pumped into him as quickly as possible. The room was small and crowded with several nurses. Some would assist during surgery and others were runners. M'Benga stood on one side of the bed, scrubbed and gowned, studying the latest scans. They had rushed Jim in from the transporter room, moving him directly into surgery where they attempted to bring his blood pressure and O2 sats up. McCoy had barely time to look at the hasty scans before he barked a series of orders and rushed to scrub. Stopping the bleeding was a priority, second only to replenishing Jim's fluids.

_"_Have you seen this, Leonard?" M'Benga asked, his eyes on the new scans._

McCoy craned his neck to see over the big man's shoulders. M'Benga pointed to Jim's spine. The damage was obvious. He swore under his breath. The implications of the scans quickly ran through his head, but he refused to linger on them. He couldn't think about that now, couldn't think about what would happen if he couldn't repair the damage, what would become of Jim.

An alarm sounded softly, drawing his attention. The anesthesiologist immediately compensated and gave McCoy a meaningful look. They didn't have much time.

_"_Let's get started," McCoy said, moving to side of the gurney. Jim had been draped and prepped and all he saw was the surgical field in front of him, a lean, pale span of flesh from the pectoral to just above the pelvis. He was grateful for the cover. It helped him to think of the body in front of him as a wound that needed repairing rather than his friend who needed saving._

The entrance wound of the photon had been cleaned and disinfected. It was ten centimeters in diameter and surrounded by blackened flesh. A thin stream of blood wept from the small opening down Jim's side and onto the table. McCoy took a deep breath.

_"_Scalpel," he said._

M'Benga stood opposite him, waiting to assist. His hands were surprisingly steady as he drew the scalpel across the flesh with practiced ease.

_"__Retractor."_

As the retractor opened the incision, a fountain of blood gushed out of the abdominal cavity. Two sets of nurses' hands rushed in with suction to clear the surgical field, letting McCoy see the internal organs that needed repair. The nurses were quick and well-trained, but Jim had been bleeding internally for hours and McCoy felt his scrubs become saturated with blood.

_"__More suction."_

M'Benga pressed a lap sponge into the open cavity and McCoy was forced to wait while the blood was cleared.

_"__Four probe," he ordered. The instrument was slapped into his hand and he inserted it into the new incision, tucking it just near the kidney._

Another set of alarms sounded and McCoy's eyes snapped up at the monitor scan. It showed a living organism in the body cavity.

The air stopped and the silence surrounded him like a thick blanket, embracing him in stillness. It was tempting to stay isolated in the small stall with the faintly sterile scented mist whirling around him. Water on any Starship went through a rigorous filtration process that gave it a slightly unnatural scent. Most didn't recognize it, but McCoy was accustomed to Earth water and had grown sensitive to the purified water on Enterprise. Despite that, he took a deep breath, letting the mist fill his lungs. After a moment, he stepped out.

The changing room was cool in comparison to the stall. A blast of recirculated air hit him like a winter breeze, waking his senses and pulling him out of his reverie. Suddenly, he was the CMO again and his respite nothing more than a fading dream. Without preamble, he changed into a fresh uniform, favoring the short-sleeved tunic. M'Benga had already showered and left and no doubt returned to medical.

Was it beta shift?

He'd lost track of time. Between the long hours on the bridge monitoring and waiting for Jim's transport and the hours in surgery, he'd lost all awareness of shifts and assigned duties. All he could think of now was Jim.

He entered the main medical bay, feeling only marginally less fatigued. He put a hand to the back of his neck. The muscles had tightened from hours in surgery and threatened a killer headache if he didn't take something soon. Out of habit, he scanned the medical bay, taking an inventory of personnel and patients. There was only one occupied bed in the main area. Ensign Petrof from the botany lab lay awake and elevated, recovering from an allergic reaction to an experimental chemical. He hadn't followed safety protocol and as soon as he was released from Sickbay he'd be in front of Spock. Nurse Trevel stood by the bed talking to him and making notes on his chart.

No crisis.

He turned away from the main area. It wasn't always possible to quarantine patients for either privacy or medical concerns. In a crisis, such as with their encounter with the Narada, every bed became a critical care unit and privacy was almost nonexistent. But when the medbay was empty, as it was now, McCoy liked to have his critical patients near his office, out of the main flow of traffic and prying eyes. It gave him the option to more closely monitor his critical patients and give them a modicum of privacy.

The ICU, if it could be called that, was really only two beds. The privacy curtain had been partially pulled on the one bed positioned nearest his office. That was where he had ordered Jim settled.

The first thing he saw as he rounded the curtain was M'Benga, standing next to the bed, fingers expertly tapping on a thin PADD. Nurse Phillips was on the opposite side, checking the many IV lines and adjusting the regulator. Her hands flitted nervously and he made a mental note to request a different nurse, one less conscious of Jim's status as captain. Medical personnel had intimate knowledge of crew, saw them at their worst and still had to eat and socialize with them as if they had never seen them bleeding and in pain. Not everyone could make the transition.

"I was getting worried." M'Benga said, glancing up at his approach. "Thought we were going to have to send someone in to rescue you."

McCoy said nothing, his eyes went going to Jim. Five units of whole blood in surgery and Jim was finishing up a sixth â€" all his own blood. McCoy had insisted on keeping an exclusive repository for Jim, a precaution due to Jim's allergies. Despite the amount of blood, the young man looked impossibly white. He raised his eyes to the monitor. Jim's vitals were dangerously low and unstable. The photon had made a clean entrance and exit wound. The intensity of the heat had burned the material and flesh instead of driving it into the wound. Jim's spleen had been lacerated and the slow, internal bleeding had been McCoy's initial concern. But it wasn't what had caused the damage.

He stepped up to the bed and Phillips moved away, her nervous fingers brushing down her uniform as if she were preparing for an inspection. A warming blanket covered Jim, but his arms rested on top of the covers to accommodate medical needs. An IV port was inserted into his right hand that lay unmoving at his side. A central line infused the whole blood. He'd remove it when the transfusion was complete. McCoy dropped his gaze to Jim's waist. A stasis field hummed beneath the blanket, raising the cover just slightly. McCoy's mouth compressed into a tight line as he recalled the damage to Jim's internal organs.

Having a patient lie on the ground of an alien planet for hours with an open wound was every physician's nightmare. Open wounds invited bacteria and infection. That was to be expected in almost any environment. But in Jim's case, an unknown parasite had found its way into the open wound and began to gorge itself on his organs, slowly doing more damage than the photon.

"His vitals dropped," M'Benga said.

McCoy nodded.

The PADD in M'Benga's hand beeped. He looked down at it, scanning the data and frowned.

"You're not going to like this," M'Benga said, handing him the PADD.

McCoy looked down at the lab results. The blood test showed that the parasite had not only feasted on Jim's organs, but had left behind microorganisms that were displaying adhesive proteins.

"Damn it," he said softly, reading down to see the infection rate.

"Yeah," M'Benga's word was drawn out and heavy. "With the damage already done to his organs, it's going to make treating it difficult."

The microorganism had a life cycle and was already well-populated in Jim's blood. Recommended treatment was a synthetic version of quinine, to which Jim was allergic, and even if he wasn't, McCoy wouldn't prescribe the treatment to any patient in Jim's current condition. It would cause more complications than good.

He handed the PADD back to M'Benga. "Have the lab run a full spectrum analysis on this parasite. I want to know everything about the life cycle. And test the rest of the landing party. It's moving rapidly through Jim, but that may be because of the method of exposure. They may be infected and not know it."

Which is all he'd need â€" an infected landing party running around the ship. He took a moment to give Jim one last look and nodded to M'Benga, dismissing him. Phillips moved to stand in the empty spot M'Benga had just occupied. He hated to leave Jim, but he had to write up his surgical notes and a more detailed report for Spock that would include prognosis and treatment plans. And anyway, there was no use standing guard. There wasn't a goddamn thing he could do for Jim right now.

3. Chapter 3

Spock stood at the foot of Kirk's bed and watched the slow, unsteady rise of Kirk's chest. The rhythm was more pronounced and the inhalations easier than when Kirk had laid on the forest floor, gasping for breath. At least the terrible wheezing had ceased, though it was clear to Spock that Kirk was in critical condition. Even without the benefit of having thoroughly read McCoy's report, he could see the man was struggling to maintain a hold on life. Kirk's complexion was a startling white, the skin almost translucent and stretched too thinly across the broad jawline, still free of any indication of facial growth. Spock's gaze travelled to the pale lips parted slightly in deep unconsciousness. He had never seen Kirk this way. It made the unrivalled young captain look breakable.

_"Take care of him, Spock," Pike said as he wheeled into his office. _

_The auditorium had just emptied after the announcement of James

Kirk's unorthodox, yet predictable promotion and the traditional celebration was underway, one Spock was certain Kirk would be participating in long into the morning. When last he saw Kirk, the newly promoted captain was enjoying the attention of several females._

_ "___From what I have observed, Captain Kirk needs a great deal of tending. More than one person can provide," Spock said._

Pike chuckled as he wheeled his chair behind his desk in his new office. "You're right."

Spock came to stand in front of Pike's desk, his hands clasped loosely behind him. He assumed the pose without effort or thought. "In any event, I am certain Captain Kirk will choose another first officer. It is his prerogative to assemble his own crew."

_ "___Don't bet against yourself, Spock."_

_ "___Vulcans do not gamble."_

Pike looked at him with a steady, serious gaze. "The two of you made an unstoppable team. You complement one another perfectly. Jim needs someone who will challenge him, as much as support his decisions."

_ "___Captain Kirk seemed impervious to both."_

Pike's eyes softened with an emotion Spock could not identify. "He's not as tough as he looks."

Spock raised his eyes. The long monitor displayed a series of yellow warning lights spread across the flat panel. For the first time he could recall, he doubted his own actions. He should have foreseen the risk of infection and taken precautions. Had he failed Pike's directive?

"You shouldn't be here," McCoy said. He'd just stepped inside the curtained area, his footfalls heavy with fatigue. "You haven't cleared medical, yet."

"The captain is already exposed to the parasite. I am hardly a threat."

McCoy snorted as he stepped past Spock. "That's not the point."

Spock watched as McCoy came to stand by the head of the bed and pull down the thin blanket to reveal Kirk's bare torso. A sterile bandage covered a large section of Kirk's left side. Of course the doctor was correct — Spock was out of protocol. His presence at Kirk's bedside was not necessary, nor was it a function of his role as acting-captain. The medical report had given him the information he needed and he'd already submitted his report to Admiral Pike.

"How is he?"

McCoy tilted his head toward Spock and raised an inquiring brow. "You read my report."

It was always this way with McCoy, never a straight answer. Spock was not so unfamiliar with human emotions that he could not detect the anger barely concealed in the doctor's tone. But the reason for the anger perplexed him. It seemed the chief medical officer was in a state of constant irritation, no matter the surrounding circumstances. "I am requesting an update."

McCoy looked away and fished a small scanner out of his pocket. "He's critical. He's not showing improvement." He paused, the scanner held steady and poised just above Kirk's navel. "But he's holding his own."

"Your prognosis?"

McCoy activated the scanner. "Guarded. His vitals have to level off." He expelled a strong breath. "That parasite did a number on him. His liver, spleen and kidneys are functioning below seventy-five percent."

Spock watched as McCoy pressed the scanner to Kirk's abdomen. The information fed onto the overhead monitor. "And the microorganism? Have you determined its nature?"

McCoy removed the scanner and pocketed it before turning to Spock. "We don't have much data. All we know is its it's attaching proteins in the blood, much like malaria in Earth's twentieth century. I have no idea of the long-term effect."

"You have a treatment?" McCoy's report had stated 'unspecified' under future treatment. He didn't know if the doctor was being deliberately vague, but he had come to observe that McCoy seemed to favor deception and challenging rules.

"I can't begin to treat this until Jim stabilizes. I'm pumping in antibiotics as fast as I can just to keep him from deteriorating further, butâ€¦" He shook his head. "It's not enough to cure him."

It took all his discipline not to demonstrate his frustration at McCoy's fractional reporting style. He kept his gaze locked onto the man, as he asked, "Is it fatal?"

McCoy's eyebrows twitched. "Even influenza can kill, Spock. There are no certainties. His damaged organs are the main concern. The microorganisms are secondary. Right now it's not a threat to his life."

Spock waited, staring unblinkingly at the doctor, who stared right back. McCoy was waiting, Spock realized, with the faintest challenge in the light colored eyes. He'd seen that look before on McCoy when the doctor had treated Kirk's injuries after the Narada had disappeared into the black hole. Did McCoy blame him for Kirk's condition? Out of the periphery of his vision he saw Kirk lying still as death. "And the damage to the Captain's spine?"

The darkness faded in the hazel eyes. "He'll make a full recovery. It might take some time, but there's no permanent damage."

It took only a moment for Spock to shift his gaze and settle on Kirk. He was alive, Spock reminded himself. He had fulfilled his duty. Why

then, he wondered, did it seem as if he had failed?

"We had to move him, Spock," McCoy said.

Spock looked at McCoy, expecting to see the tight mouth and narrow eyes the doctor so readily displayed. But instead, the doctor's expression was soft with understanding.

"He was bleeding to death."

A calculated risk. What was it that Kirk had said? 'You're captain now, Spock.' As if that erased accountability. "When will he wake?"

McCoy's mouth tightened as he broke Spock's gaze. Turning his head, he looked at Kirk. "He should have awakened hours ago."

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Home.

Take me home.

A cool hand on his forehead. "You're all right, Captain."

A soft, feminine voice. Not home.

"You're on Enterprise."

He struggles to open his eyes and focus. The world around him is blurry and dark. The sun has gone down.

"You should rest," the voice says.

He continues to try to focus. Enterprise? He can't feel her, the soft drum of her engines. "Spock." The word comes out garbled. His tongue is thick.

"I'm sorry, sir?"

The sound of artillery fills his ears. The battle is getting closer. Had Spock left him? They can't be seen. They can't get caught. Where was Wilson?

He tries to move, but he can't. He's bound and restrained. A high-pitch whine sounds and there is the cacophony of voices. Hands are on him.

They are discovered. He fights because that's what he does. He fails. Pain ignites in his spine, paralyzing him. An explosion of white light erupts in his head. Where is Spock? Where are his men? Somewhere deep inside a thought surfaces: He wants to go home.

He sinks into dark numbness.

"You're home, Jim."

The voice awakens him, but his eyes are already open. He blinks and tries to focus on the image floating above him. It's a very fuzzy

McCoy.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?"

He closes his eyes for a moment and feels his heart beating loudly. There's movement around him and he hears soft metallic clicking. He takes a few gentle breaths. When he opens his eyes again he sees Bones staring down at him with a deep scowl.

"Not happy â€| to see â€| me?" he manages to get out. His throat is dry and sore.

"You make it difficult."

His vision clears a little more. He sees the electric blue ceiling of Sickbay and the lights reflecting off it like stars. A slight shift of his head and he sees the privacy curtain is pulled. That's not good. He focuses again on Bones.

"Welcome home," Bones says flatly.

Home. His head hurts. "Spock?"

"Hold on." Bones disappears from his view. He appears moments later. "I'm going to elevate the bed a little."

The motion sends the world around him spinning, forcing him to close his eyes. His body is heavy and, aside from his head, nothing hurts.

"That's because I've got you on a heavy dose of analgesic."

He opens his eyes to find Bones staring intensely at him.

"You're welcome. I don't recommend moving. You undid some of my handiwork during you're little episode last night. Even with the amount of painkillers I've got in you, you'll feel it."

He frowns. He doesn't remember anything about last night â€| or getting onto the ship. But he does remember the hole in his side. His gaze travels up to the head of the bed and the bags of fluids hanging. "Things okay?"

"Could be better."

His head really hurts and he just wants a straight answer from Bones. He lets out a short breath. "Bones."

"The photon missed your spine. Obviously. The damage is more soft tissue from the surrounding trauma. You lost quite a bit of blood, but you know that. Most of which we replaced."

Bones continues staring at him, the hazel eyes sharp and penetrating. He sorts out what Bones is saying, but he can't connect it all. So, he says, "Okay."

Bones' eyebrows rise slightly, then an instant later his eyes narrow. "There's more. You picked up a parasite down there. Got into the open wound."

He closes his eyes, not because he's tired, but because he needs a moment to think and it's too difficult to think and focus with the dancing lights and Bones staring and his head pounding. He must have drifted off because the next time he opens his eyes he is alone and the lights are dimmed. The soft sounds of the medical panel hum and beep like a lullaby. His head feels stuffy, but his thoughts are clear. After a few measured breaths, he drags his right hand across his body, pausing at the tender spot at his side. It is oddly numb. He remembers the pain of Spock pushing his hand into him trying to staunch the flow of blood.

Spock. Wilson.

He rolls his head across the pillow to get a better look at the room, but he can only see to the privacy curtain. He half expects to see Bones sleeping in the empty chair, ready with a reassuring word. He hates this isolation. A dozen questions race through his mind, all needing answers. Was the mission a success? Was Wilson on board?

'Could be better,' Bones had said.

Had he lost a man?

He suddenly realizes how warm he is. A trickle of sweat runs down his temple. The blanket is an unbearable restriction. He drags his hand from its resting spot on his injured side and grips the thin blanket, clumsily pulling it down. He shifts and the movement brings discomfort to his belly.

Suddenly, he's not alone. A tall, red-headed nurse appears from behind the curtain.

"Everything all right, Captain?" she asks politely.

"I want to see Spock."

She reaches for something above his head. "Just a moment."

He closes his eyes for a moment. The deep throbbing in his belly is getting difficult to ignore. His body is covered with sweat.

It takes him a moment to realize M'Benga is in the room, speaking quietly to the nurse. His heart is pounding and he can't seem to slow it down. He forces his eyes open and makes his best command.

"I want to see Spock. Now."

M'Benga looks down at him with a practiced expression that says nothing. "It's gamma shift, Captain. He's well off duty."

The throbbing in his belly is more pronounced. He shifts again in an attempt to alleviate the pain. His body is shaking. "He's the fucking captain. He's always on duty."

An alarm sounds.

The bed lowers until he lies flat. He doesn't want this. He wants to talk to Spock, but he can't seem to gather his thoughts from the pounding in his head and the pain in belly. Hands are in motion above

him. It's difficult to breathe, to think. All the while he's staring at M'Benga who doesn't seem to be concerned with carrying out his captain's orders.

The new face in the room is not Spock as he requested, but that of McCoy, who is pushing M'Benga aside to stare down at him.

"Calm down, Jim."

M'Benga says something to McCoy that he can't hear, but it causes McCoy to turn away for a moment. When McCoy turns back to him, the doctor's expression is soft.

"We've given you something for the pain, but you need to calm down."

"Spock," he manages to get out. His vision is getting dark. He tries to get up, but he really can't move.

"Everything is all right." There's a cool hand on his forehead. "Just rest."

He doesn't want to rest, but whatever McCoy gave him is pulling him down. He's too tired to resist.

End
file.